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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000050

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: GOAM BACKS OFF ON RADIO LIBERTY

REF: A. 07 YEREVAN 1394

[1B.](#) 07 YEREVAN 1353

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.4(B,D)

SUMMARY

[¶11.](#) (C) In a meeting with CDA and visiting RFE/RL rep Julia Ragona, Presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorkian acknowledged that Radio Liberty's Armenia Service broadcasts had become "more balanced," and backed off his previous threats to take RL off the air. Ragona told Gevorkian that RFE/RL had made some adjustments in its Armenian language programming following a thorough review of program content and quality. Ragona acknowledged privately to us that the internal review uncovered "some sloppiness" and "poor editorial judgment" that has now been corrected. At least for now, the GOAM has been dissuaded from acting against Radio Liberty, a move that would have had disastrous consequences for international assessments of the current presidential election campaign. End Summary.

"WE HEAR A DIFFERENCE"

[¶12.](#) (C) Visiting RFE/RL representative Julia Ragona, accompanied by CDA and Pol/econ chief, met with Presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorkian, presidential Spokesman Viktor Soghomonian, and presidential adviser Vigen Sargsian January 17 to follow up on the Presidency's allegation that RL broadcasts had become heavily slanted toward former President Levon Ter-Petrosian (LTP), one of nine candidates in the February 19 presidential election, and threats by Kocharian's office to take RL off the air (reflets). Although Gevorkian and Soghomonian cited several additional examples of what they viewed as "advocacy" for LTP by RL journalists, they also said that the overall content of RL's Armenian language broadcasts had become "much more balanced" in recent weeks.

[¶13.](#) (C) Ragona informed the president's men that RFE/RL management had followed through on its commitment to conduct an objective, top-to-bottom review of its Armenian language programming. The review had been accelerated, she said, because of the upcoming election in Armenia. Ragona confirmed that some adjustments to RL programs had been made as a result of the review, adding that more changes may be forthcoming "to ensure that Radio Liberty is where it needs to be, in terms of objectivity and journalistic standards." She further pledged that a senior editor from RFE/RL's Prague office would be sent to Yerevan office several weeks in

advance of the February 19 election to ensure objective coverage of the presidential campaign. Gevorkian made no mention of his previous threats to "take steps" against Radio Liberty, and couched his ongoing concerns about RL broadcasts in noticeably milder terms than in the past.

¶4. (C) Despite the easing of tensions, Gevorkian reiterated his claim that the head of the RL Armenia Service, Harry Tamrazian, has cut a deal with LTP that would give him a senior position in the next administration if the former president is elected. When Ragona pressed him about the source of that information, Gevorkian was evasive. He said he "talks to people" on the RL staff, and has "heard things" about Tamrazian from a wide range of contacts. Ragona responded that RFE/RL will not take action based on rumors, but offered to look at any concrete information the GOAM is able to produce.

REVIEW UNCOVERED "SLOPPINESS, POOR JUDGMENT"

¶5. (C) Ragona acknowledged to us privately before meeting with Gevorkian that the RFE/RL internal review had revealed "some sloppiness" and "poor editorial judgment" in its Armenian language broadcasts. That finding corresponds with post's concerns (ref A) about problems inside the RL Armenia Service and our view that Gevorkian's allegations, while highly exaggerated, were not entirely without merit. Ragona confirmed that she is now fully engaged in "sorting out the management issues" in the Armenia Service, and foreshadowed additional steps in coming months.

COMMENT

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¶6. (C) The battle with Kocharian's office to keep Radio Liberty on the air through the election period appears to have been won. The President has backed away from a decision that would have been disastrous for international assessments of Armenia's election process. RFE/RL's quick and decisive action to address the shortcomings uncovered by its internal review was probably the determining factor in the Presidency's decision to back off. Our repeated warnings of negative consequences for Armenia's MCC program, its relationship with Washington, and the perception of the election campaign may have also played a role. In the end, the President's men may have reached the conclusion that PM Sargsian was right all along on this issue -- the current authorities will never like Radio Liberty, but it probably "won't make much of a difference" on February 19.

PENNINGTON